



BRILL

JOURNAL OF CHINESE HUMANITIES 9 (2023) 264–282



brill.com/joch

The Interaction between Custom and Ritual in Chinese Society

Zhang Shishan 張士閃

Professor, Advanced Institute for Confucian Studies, Shandong University,
Jinan, Shandong, China

zhshsh64@163.com

Received 5 April 2023 | Accepted 21 April 2023 |

Published online 24 October 2023

Abstract

In traditional China's complicated social system, the interaction between custom and ritual laid the foundation for a national political framework and local societal functions, and has continued to play a role in modern Chinese nation-building since the May Fourth Movement. The essence of this interaction is that it draws together national politics with non-governmental micropolitics; by engaging widespread support from across society, it ensures that society's internal mechanisms function smoothly through a shared cultural identity, thereby eliminating real or potential social crises. Today, in a time of rapid globalization, all nations are faced with issues such as international regulations, national legal rights, and civil governance. Chinese traditional political wisdom and social mechanisms embedded in the interaction between custom and ritual may be useful.

Keywords

ritual – custom – interaction between custom and ritual – Chinese society

In the context of Chinese society, “custom” (*su* 俗) and “ritual” (*li* 禮) are not merely social phenomena: they are also forms of discourse. In a fundamental sense, although discursive forms are social phenomena, they also represent an

understanding and expression of social phenomena, and are a direct demonstration of so-called “social thought.” Therefore, in the field of social research, discursive forms carry particular significance. Broadly speaking, whether we are referring to social reality or discursive forms, both customs and ritual have been universal phenomena and common features of Chinese society since time immemorial, with the reciprocal practices between the two laying the foundations for a national political framework and the functioning of society as a whole. They have continued to play a role in modern Chinese nation-building since the May Fourth Movement. Thus, they should be viewed as fundamental to understanding China. This paper seeks to employ custom (folk culture), ritual (and its norms as laid down by the state), and the interaction between the two as tools of scholarly analysis. It focuses on the phenomena of custom and ritual within Chinese society and their discursive forms; and it pays close attention to the prominence of custom and ritual in times of social change. Within an analytical framework encompassing the course of national history and the daily practices of ordinary people, this research attempts to understand the traditional political wisdom of Chinese civilization and its inner workings, with its mechanisms for checks and balances.

1 The Traditional Formation of the Discourse of Custom and Ritual

The subject of custom and ritual has a long history in China and has been discussed for thousands of years. As a form of self-representation in traditional Chinese society – that is, a perception and generalization of local social realities – it has been approached from multiple angles in different historical contexts.

As discourse phenomena, custom and ritual appeared regularly in pre-Qin era texts and the use of these terms continued into later generations. The two terms could be used separately or combined. When used separately, ritual (*li*) referred to systematized state rites and protocols; and custom (*su*) referred to the everyday habits that evolved organically among ordinary people. When used together, “custom and ritual” referred specifically to social situations or cultural peculiarities where traditional Chinese custom and ritual intersected. Tracing their origins, we find that *li* was originally a cultural construct of the pre-Qin upper class, while *su* developed over the long term as the cultural practices of ordinary people. In the context of Chinese society, however, the connection between the two never seems to have been severed; instead, they have always complemented each other. In the words of Peng Mu 彭牧:

The Confucian ritual was a tradition that became static and textualized on the basis of ancient custom, always echoing the custom from which it was derived. Over the course of history, elites used ritual to change custom on the one hand, while on the other, custom among ordinary people continually changed ritual.

Custom and ritual represented the parallel and mutually compatible social practices and behaviors of different social classes. The reason that elites looked upon custom with disdain was to maintain the purity and orthodoxy of ritual, because the former could easily influence the direction of the latter.

Historically, not only did custom give rise to and refine ritual, but ritual was always engaged in an intimate reciprocal relationship with the daily practices of local customs. Moreover, custom's close relation to daily life lent itself easily to change. It also furnished ritual with a basic driving force. It can be said that in the mutual opposition and tension between them, custom and ritual depended on each other for growth.¹

Successive generations of China's intellectual elite, with their foundation in Confucian thought, always gave equal importance to cultural development and life practices. In the development of a cultural configuration, they used daily customs as a cultural foundation. The intellectual elite took it as their duty to enlighten common people, believing that "changing old customs and habits"² and "using folk customs as the foundation for the development and implementation of the norms of etiquette"³ would lead to national prosperity and safeguard all living creatures, while also acting as a basis for personal conduct.

In commentaries on the *Sanli* 三禮 (The Three Confucian Classics on Ritual), we can see that custom and ritual were central topics in classical Chinese thought. Consider the following from the *Zhouli* 周禮: "According to the eight systems for governing the capital and the fiefs ... number six is custom and ritual."⁴ From the *Zhouli* we also read that "decrees, corporal punishment and prohibitions of the capital and its fiefs, tax and corvée exemptions, custom and ritual, funeral arrangements, sacrificial offerings are all applied according to the principle of land condition. An appropriate ban will be administered."⁵

1 Peng Mu 彭牧, "Tong yi zhi jian: li yu yishi" 同異之間：禮與儀式, *Minsu yanjiu* 民俗研究, no. 3 (2014): 5, 11, 14.

2 移風易俗, a phrase popularized by the Confucian philosopher Xunzi 荀子 (313–238 BCE).

3 A phrase from the Confucian classic *Liji* 禮記.

4 *Zhouli zhushu* 周禮注疏, vol. 4 of *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, ed. Li Xueqin 李學勤 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 27–28.

5 *Ibid.*, 409.

From the *Liji* 禮記, we read that “one cannot accomplish morality and benevolence without ritual; one cannot perfect instruction and guidance without ritual.” In the same volume we read such statements as “ritual follows appropriateness and custom” and “a person with moral integrity practices ritual without changing custom.”⁶ In the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), there was a belief, recorded in the *Hanshu* 漢書, that “Confucius said, ‘when rituals are lost, they need to be sought (once again) from among the people.’”⁷ We can see from these passages that as ritual tended toward ever greater systemization, custom gradually turned into a latent yet decisive contributing factor in the political life of the state. This has been a general rule in the course of world civilization. However, the realization of communal harmony under the rule of an efficient government was strongly interrelated to institutional planning encapsulated in the notions that “in ancient times, when the ruler inspected his vassal states, he ordered the Music Master to present local songs so as to understand the social atmosphere”⁸ and “to govern, a monarch had to steer custom by honoring exemplary behavior.”⁹ These are also examples of “Chinese characteristics” from the pre-Qin era that were inherited by later dynasties.

Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲 (1848–1905), regarded as “the first modern Chinese person to venture into the world,”¹⁰ expressed his ideal of saving China from its social ills through the language of custom and ritual. Huang believed that “transforming social traditions” and “governing the people and transforming the people” were means by which Chinese politics would be able to modernize; that the most important aspects of Chinese society were human relationships and habits; and that “custom and ritual are derived from these.”¹¹

The continued exploration of folk songs, stories, and customs by the intellectual elite at the heart of the modern Chinese folksong movement, which was exemplified by the Peking University journal *Geyao zhoukan* 歌謠周刊, sparked the modern reform of traditional Chinese custom and ritual. Those folk songs, stories, and customs, once regarded as common in traditional China, entered history’s stage as alien to (or as the Other of) orthodox culture,

6 *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, vol. 6 of *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, ed. Li Xueqin 李學勤 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 14, 11, and 108.

7 *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 1746.

8 Wang Yangming 王陽明, *Wang Yangming quanji (xin bian ben)* 王陽明全集 (新編本) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2010), 22.876.

9 *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, vol. 3 of *Shisanjing zhushu (Qing Jiaqing kanben)* 十三經註疏 (清嘉慶刊本), ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 55-3578.

10 Du Weidong 杜衛東, “Jindai Zhongguo zouxiang shijie diyiren” 近代中國走向世界第一人, *Guangming ribao* 光明日報, July 9, 2022.

11 Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲, *Riben guo zhi* 日本國志, annot. Li Shaoping 李紹平 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2016), 1121.

and became an important cultural resource in the construction of the modern Chinese nation. In a preface to *Minsu zhoukan* 民俗週刊 in 1928, Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980) stated: “We must break free from history centered on the elite, and from history anchored in the lives and culture of sages. We must bring the history of all people into the light.”¹² Gu’s appeal to public sentiment was intended to rouse criticism of the cultural traditions of the sages and elevate the historical perspectives focusing on ordinary people. Leading intellectuals who received a modern education were driven by a strong sense of historical mission to save China from disaster and ensure its survival, and to awaken the Chinese people; they sought, by a “rediscovery” of folk values, to construct a narrative of revolution and reform. With this in mind, these intellectuals logically understood the society and culture of their time such that “custom” and “ritual” were separate or even opposed to one another. Take for instance the Vernacular Movement in opposition to *wenyanwen* 文言文 (classical literary language), the traditional writings of classical Chinese. The launch of the literary revolution sought to subvert the old literature of the elite. The traditional discourse of custom and ritual was now being defined clearly in terms of a duality. Terms such as “the people,” “folk custom,” and “folk literature and art” referred to the lives or culture of common people, and concepts such as “the popular mood,” “the education of the people,” and “people’s livelihood” served as foundations for social revolution or reform. As Lü Wei 呂微 said, the nationalist ideology on which modern nations are founded is the structural result of the renewed exploration and transformation of certain cultural traditions. Moreover, the cultural community of an imagined nation-state can be invented via the exploration of popular cultural traditions. Ideas of the exploration of “the people” during the May Fourth period were first used to express a belief in society and modernity; when scholars and revolutionaries discovered that the ideas and beliefs attached to “the people” could transcend narrow-minded historical concepts of the nation, folk culture naturally came to be regarded as a source of strength for cultural constructs for the modern nation-state.¹³

It is not difficult to see that the Confucian tradition, which laid equal stress on the unity of knowledge and practice as well as that of cultural constructs and life practices, formed a continuous link with the intellectual elites of the May Fourth generation, and took on a new dimension. On the one hand, these elites bid farewell to the traditional scholar identity by aligning

12 Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, “Shengxian wenhua yu minzhong wenhua” 聖賢文化與民眾文化, *Minsu zhoukan* 民俗週刊, no. 5 (1928): 1–7.

13 Lü Wei 呂微, “Xiandai xing lunzheng zhong de minjian wenxue” 現代性論爭中的民間文學, *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論, no. 2 (2000): 132.

themselves with the people; in this modern social context, they forged a role for themselves as the new elite. On the other hand, custom and ritual were traditionally dichotomous, and were not absolutely equivalent to officialdom and “the people”; nonetheless, based on the need for enlightenment, the new elite intentionally placed custom and ritual as cultural categories in diametric opposition to one another and “officialdom” and “the people” as diametrically opposed social classes. The modern meanings of custom and ritual thus came into being, along with a sense of opposition or antagonism between them. An overview of the Republican era reveals that the remaking of custom and ritual was a matter of great interest among both the government and the intellectual elite. The scholarly inheritance of the tradition of applying theories of governance was focused more on actual social problems and was the subject of scholarly works. By reflecting on the relationship between themselves and ordinary people, and between scholarship and politics, a minority of scholars also attempted to understand and present an overall sense of the lives of ordinary people and folk culture. Yet, because this was not sufficiently in step with the political demands of the era, it merely occupied a marginal position – in both the social movements of the time and in academic discourse.¹⁴ Over time, this may be seen as a new variation in the traditional discourse of custom and ritual in modern society, the so-called “new wine in old bottles.”

In summary, it can be seen that a society based on custom and ritual took shape in China from an early time; a social formation emerged in which national politics and civil autonomy functioned jointly. First, as a social reality, “ritual” integrated with national politics to form a cultural system that would gradually coalesce. In the realm of “custom,” meanwhile, various social models of people’s “micro governments” emerged as a function of local lives. On this basis, the interaction between custom and ritual, which had long been present in Chinese social history, juggled the roles of maintaining both “national unity” and local community advancement. Second, in terms of discourse development, custom and ritual gradually became important discursive tools in traditional Chinese society involving officialdom, the scholarly elite, and ordinary people and assumed various functions among different social classes. Among the ruling class, the discourse of custom and ritual was the art of governing the country and keeping the people under control; among the groups of the scholarly elite, it was the art of settling down and getting on with one’s

14 Shen Jie 沈潔, “Lisu gaizao de xueshu shijian: ershi shiji er sanshi niandai Zhongguo minsu xuejia de lisu diaocha” 禮俗改造的學術實踐—20世紀二三十年代中國民俗學家的禮俗調查, *Shi lin* 史林, no. 1 (2008): 143–44.

life;¹⁵ for ordinary people, in contrast, it was a means of social interaction. A cultural identity centered on a so-called “society of custom and ritual” thus formed, and was internalized as an inherent rule by which “insiders” could manage their livelihood, understand society, and conduct government affairs. It is also important to note that although traditional society viewed “the control of custom through ritual” and “the intersection of custom and ritual” as socio-political ideals, within the framework of how society operated, such ideals were frequently premised on each social strata acting voluntarily and in its own way. This means that only with “custom” and “ritual” separate and secure in their own traditions was there a guarantee that the two could interact systematically under the effective control of a social order. By the time “changes not felt for millennia” had befallen modern China, a group of intellectual elites dedicated themselves to “placing ordinary people at the front and center of academic history”;¹⁶ with that, the modern relevance of the traditional narrative of custom and ritual had been discovered, while the traditional political framework of a “society based on custom and ritual” was dealt a violent and unprecedented shock.

2 Uncovering the Modern Implications of “Custom” and “Ritual”

Traditional China boasted a complex social system. A complicated and deep-seated symbiotic relationship existed between the lives of ordinary people and the politics of the state, which is of interest to the academic community. Yet, in existing research on the nature of Chinese society (“social nature”), those who focus on the nation as a “unified domain” frequently lay too much emphasis on the social direction of the “rites of passage”; those who focus on local communities lay too much emphasis on the development of systems of local autonomy and how they operate. From this, they formed certain biased observations of Chinese society. When examining the relationship between officials and ordinary people, or between the centralization of state power and popular will, these absolutists thoroughly disregard the interrelation between the two. They even go so far as to emphasize the opposition between the two, while neglecting the former social realities of custom and ritual-based Chinese

15 Yang Nianqun 楊念群, “Da yitong: quanshi ‘hewei Zhongguo’ de yige xin tujing” “大一統”: 詮釋“何謂中國”的一個新途徑, *Nanfang wenwu* 南方文物, no. 1 (2016): 14–15.

16 Zhong Jingwen 鍾敬文, *Zhong Jingwen xueshu lunzhu zixuan ji* 鍾敬文學術論著自選集 (Beijing: Shoudu shifan daxue chubanshe, 2004), 7.

society, its political wisdom, and discursive forms.¹⁷ Chinese society has long had a highly stable structure. It is a misrepresentation to overemphasize alienation and opposition between officialdom and ordinary people; it is likewise a misrepresentation to neglect the various forms of cooperation between the power held by ordinary people and the centralization of state power. As for the complex, deep-seated symbiotic relationship between these two forms of power, one group of scholars have in recent years taken fieldwork as a starting point from which they have synthesized research methods from historiography, folklore, anthropology, and other disciplines. They have aimed to “treat culture as a set of dynamic elements in which the individual is a historical subject, and in which the individual’s impact on the course of history is examined via their daily life over extended periods.”¹⁸ By exploring the details of life in regional China, they seek to understand and interpret Chinese social traditions in their entirety and via a bottom-up approach, which is certainly innovative. Simultaneously, and unlike the objectives of the researchers outlined above, a group of so-called “modern Neo-Confucian” scholars, one that seeks to benefit mankind and put Confucian traditions into practice and is committed to combining knowledge and practice, tends toward a top-down approach as they seek to interpret Chinese traditions. In the multiple interactions between ideology and practice stretching over a century, these have been highly influential socio-cultural movements both in China and abroad.¹⁹ Both movements focus on the details of social life as evidence of the construction of the social order. Each had its own origin and, in objective terms, formed a complementary relationship with echoes of the other. Due to space considerations, the main object of enquiry in this paper is the former group.

In the early stages of research into custom and ritual in the modern era, “custom and ritual” was frequently used on a conceptual level as a generic term

17 Gan Yang 甘陽, “‘Minjian shehui’ gainian pipan” “民間社會” 概念批判, in *Guojia yu shehui* 國家與社會, ed. Zhang Jing 張靜 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1998), 24–35.

18 Zhao Shiyu 趙世瑜, Xing Long 行龍, and Chang Jianhua 常建華, “Zouxiang duoyuan kaifang de shehui shi: Zhongguo shehui shi yanjiu 30 nian de huigu yu qianzhan” 走向多元開放的社會史—中國社會史研究30年的回顧與前瞻, *Guangming ribao* 光明日報, March 24, 2009.

19 So-called “Modern Neo-Confucianism” includes such expressions as “the three generations and four cliques” and “the eight great Neo-Confucian families.” Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, Xiong Shili 熊十力, Ma Yifu 馬一浮, Zhang Junmai 張君勱, Feng Youlan 馮友蘭, He Lin 賀麟, Qian Mu 錢穆, Fang Dongmei 方東美, Tang Junyi 唐君毅, Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, Yu Yingshi 余英時, Liu Shuxian 劉述先, Cheng Zhongying 成中英, and Du Weiming 杜維明 are among the most influential figures.

for folklore, or specifically referred to “folk beliefs,”²⁰ while “a society based on custom and ritual” was used as a characterization of Chinese society.²¹ In terms of research orientation, although the connection between ritual and custom was generally considered, this connection was often broadly stated in terms of ritual being derived from custom, ritual being undergirded by custom, and the changes that ritual and custom underwent. This approach stopped short of providing a wider overview or understanding of Chinese society and cultural history. Since the 1980s, certain scholars have attempted to probe the nature of Chinese society from the perspective of officialdom and the people working in tandem, as well as the intermingling of ritual and custom. Although Chang Jincang’s 常金倉 “Research on Custom and Ritual of the Zhou Dynasty” concentrated on the development and evolution of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1046–256 BCE) system of rites and protocols, his assessment that “ritual was derived from custom,” “custom and ritual were complementary,” and that “ritual was hierarchical, while custom was arbitrary” can be said to be well-founded.²² Yang Zhigang 楊志剛 was among the first to focus on how “in Chinese culture, custom and ritual coupled with one another to form a unique system and served a crucial function; they influenced and regulated historical development through the dynamics of contradictory movements.” Mainly, however, the integrative, guiding functions of his chronological survey offer no discussion of the corresponding social system or its mechanisms.²³ On the emergence of the term “custom and ritual” in Chinese history, Wang Guimin 王貴民 offers insight into its split status. He provides a broad overview of Chinese cultural history as a starting point; his understanding of custom and ritual is such that it constituted “a form of movement involving reciprocal absorption of learning and integration,” thereby laying a foundation for political rule and society in traditional China.²⁴ Wang’s insight is enlightening. Shao Fengli’s 邵鳳麗 attention to the discourse of “custom” and “ritual” is a reflection of the nature of Chinese society. For Shao, “the words ‘custom’ and ‘ritual’

20 For example, after studying Western religion at the University of Chicago, Jiang Shaoyuan 江紹原, one of the earliest representative figures in the history of modern Chinese folklore, drew on Western religious concepts to equate Chinese custom and ritual with folk beliefs.

21 See for instance Liu Yizheng 柳詒徵, “Zhongguo lisu shi fapan” 中國禮俗史發凡, *Xue yuan* 學原, no. 1 (1947), and Deng Ziqin 鄧子琴, *Zhongguo lisu xue gangyao* 中國禮俗學綱要 (Nanjing: Zhongguo wenhua she, 1947).

22 Chang Jincang 常金倉, *Zhou dai lisu yanjiu* 周代禮俗研究 (Ha'erbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 2004), 7–10.

23 Yang Zhigang 楊志剛, “Lisu yu Zhongguo wenhua” 禮俗與中國文化, *Fudan xuebao* 復旦學報, no. 3 (1990): 77.

24 Wang Guimin 王貴民, *Zhongguo lisu shi* 中國禮俗史 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1993), 2.

encapsulate traditional Chinese culture. They represent cultural patterns in which ritual is embedded within custom, in which life is lived by rites and customs." Simultaneously, Shao also draws attention to the intimate link between custom and ritual concerning lived reality.²⁵ Liu Zhiqin 劉志琴, by contrast, advocated the difference between "custom" and "ritual" as a point of departure. For Liu, "a study of the necessities of life of the Chinese people from the point of view of the interaction between custom and ritual helps us to gain a deeper understanding of China's national conditions and the nature of its people." His highly pertinent observation that "the history of Chinese thought ought to extend beyond the limits imposed by the history of ideas; expounding the sequences of ideas behind Chinese thought in terms of the interaction between custom and ritual is a means of re-evaluating the value of Chinese intellectual history" is even more important.²⁶

Generally speaking, the research outlined in the preceding paragraphs takes Chinese social history and discursive forms related to custom and ritual, as well as social realities, as its starting point. It holds that the division and interaction between custom and ritual are related to the general nature of Chinese society, a point of view that is quite innovative. Its focus remains essentially on top-down interpretations of Chinese history in which "ritual is used to change local custom, and elite ideas undergo socialization";²⁷ nonetheless, it underestimates the cultural creativity of regional or local communities, and as a result, it struggles to capture the overall landscape of the traditional interaction between custom and ritual in Chinese society. Other scholars, who constitute a minority, no longer view the panorama of Chinese history through the lens of "custom" and "ritual"; rather, their focus lies on specific historical periods in an attempt to explain the relationship between the overall political structure of Chinese society and the nation's social mechanisms. Luo Zhitian 羅志田, for instance, believes that beginning in the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) and in light of the "emptying of the counties" that took shape under a unified domain, scholars launched sustained efforts to develop lower social classes via methods centered on "the courtesy of the common people," and reminded people that "we do not always need to focus on the opposition or even the

25 Shao Fengli 邵鳳麗, "Huashuo lisu" 话说礼俗, *Baike zhishi* 百科知識, no. 18 (2014): 45.

26 Liu Zhiqin 劉志琴, "Lisu hudong shi Zhongguo sixiang shi de bentu tese" 禮俗互動是中國思想史的本土特色, *Dongfang luntan* 東方論壇, no. 3 (2008): 1, 7. For related comments, see Liu Zhiqin 劉志琴, "Lisu wenhua de zai yanjiu: huiying wenhua yanjiu de xin sichao" 禮俗文化的再研究—回應文化研究的新思潮, *Shi xue lilun yanjiu* 史學理論研究, no. 1 (2005), and Liu Zhiqin 劉志琴, "Lisu hudong de guoqing yu minxing" 禮俗互動的國情與民性, *Beijing ribao* 北京日報, October 27, 2014.

27 Liu Zhiqin, "Lisu hudong shi Zhongguo sixiang shi de bentu tese," 4.

confrontations between ‘the regions’ and ‘the nation’; we should also see that the two complement each other.”²⁸ Geng Bo 耿波 has traced the source of the Zhou dynasty politics of ritual, viewing “the interaction between custom and ritual” as a form of political connection and social practice between villagers, scholars, and the sovereign, and elaborating on the capacity of traditional Chinese custom and ritual to appeal to all citizens.²⁹

Distinct from the research paths described above, a certain number of scholars have in recent years used field research as a starting point for their work to connect the Chinese social discourse of “custom” and “ritual” and their reciprocal practices with the process of national unification and the political traditions, large and small, of regional social development, demonstrating the vitality of broader academic perspectives and empirical research. In this regard, it should first be noted that David Faure has dedicated himself over the long term to fieldwork investigations of communities in various regions of China, viewing local religions, sacrificial offerings to ancestors, the creation of community festivals, popular textual traditions, temple construction and so forth as “meaningful signifiers of ritual.” Faure’s purpose has been to “re-establish the process by which local communities integrated into the Chinese empire” by explaining how local communities acquired and identified with the characteristics of their own history, as well as how they accepted and integrated into the history of a national unified cultural domain.³⁰ By conducting case studies in the field, Zhao Shiyu 趙世瑜 has devoted himself to the integration of macro history and micro history, stating that this is “because history was originally one, just as life was originally one.”³¹ This leads to the suggestion that “top-down” and “bottom-up” research angles may be integrated. Zhao also cites the example of Jin temples in Taiyuan 太原, Shanxi province; he describes in meticulous detail the circumstances broadly shared by the state and local

28 Luo Zhitian 羅志田, “Difang de jinshi shi: ‘junxian kongxu’ shidai de lixia shuren yu xiangli shehui” 地方的近世史：“郡縣空虛”時代的禮下庶人與鄉里社會, *Jindaishi yanjiu* 近代史研究, no. 5 (2015): 11, 26.

29 Geng Bo 耿波, “Lisu hudong chuantong zhong de Xu Fuguan nong ben zhengzhi guan” 禮俗互動傳統中的徐復觀農本政治觀, *Zhongguo zhengfa daxue xuebao* 中國政法大學學報, no. 2 (2014): 28.

30 David Faure 科大衛 and Liu Zhiwei 劉志偉, “Biaozhun hua’ haishi ‘zhengtong hua’? Cong minjian xinyang yu liyi kan Zhongguo wenhua de da yitong” “標準化”還是“正統化”？—從民間信仰與禮儀看中國文化的大一統, *Lishi renlei xue xuekan* 歷史人類學學刊 no. 1, 2 (2008): 1–21.

31 Zhao Shiyu 趙世瑜, *Xiao lishi yu da lishi: quyu shehui shi de linian, fangfa yu shijian* 小歷史與大歷史：區域社會史的理念、方法與實踐 (Beijing: Shenghuo – dushu – jinzhi san lian shudian, 2006), 10.

communities after “custom” had become part of “ritual.”³² This relationship between custom and ritual, resulting from a combination of social forces, was one of the practical forms of the cultural and political model characterized by the “interaction between custom and ritual” within Chinese society. In the same vein, the present author believes that the structure of traditional Chinese society, characterized by the interaction between custom and ritual, could be established and endure only via a historical process founded on the mutual absorption and constant negotiation between the diversity of regional communities and a national unified domain. Furthermore, the cultural identity of folk society was the foundation for the political framework of “custom” and “ritual.”³³ Liu Tieliang 劉鐵梁 believes that the reciprocal relationship between state politics and civil autonomy not only gave social organizations their fundamental shape, but also led to cross-cultural phenomena in social life.³⁴

Although clear discursive differences existed between state ritual and folk custom, the two should not be juxtaposed as two different cultural entities, but rather as two closely related but different forms of expression within the one culture. It is just that the former tended strongly toward institutional rules and regulations at the national political level, and the latter tended toward a kind of spontaneous transmission in the lives of common people.³⁵ It is not difficult to appreciate why Zheng Zhenman 鄭振滿 has summarized the research paradigm used in historical anthropology as one that “emphasizes (the role of) folk literature and of fieldwork investigation, endeavors to return to historical sites, and researches history via folklore.”³⁶ Nonetheless, to fully realize “the research of history via folklore,” it would be vital to undertake comprehensive studies encompassing folklore and the administrative functions of the state, as well

32 Zhao Shiyu 趙世瑜, “Er yuan de Jin ci: li yu su de fenhe” 二元的晉祠：禮與俗的分合, *Minsu yanjiu* 民俗研究, no. 4 (2015): 12.

33 Zhang Shishan 張士閃, “Yanguang xiang xia: xin shiqi Zhongguo yishu xue de ‘tianye zhuanxiang’ – yi yishu minsu xue wei hexin de kaocha” 眼光向下：新時期中國藝術學的“田野轉向”——以藝術民俗學為核心的考察, *Minzu yishu* 民族藝術, no. 1 (2015): 22.

34 Liu Tieliang 劉鐵梁, “Chuantong xiangcun shehui zhong jiating de quanyi yu diwei: Huangpu jiang yan’an cunluo minsu de diaocha” 傳統鄉村社會中家庭的權益與地位——黃浦江沿岸村落民俗的調查, *Beijing shifan daxue xuebao* 北京師範大學學報, no. 6 (2001): 61; Liu Tieliang 劉鐵梁, “Cunluo shenghuo yu wenhua tixi zhong de xiang min yishu” 村落生活與文化體系中的鄉民藝術, *Minzu yishu* 民族藝術, no. 1 (2006): 42.

35 Benjamin Schwartz 史華慈, *Gudai Zhongguo de sixiang shijie* 古代中國的思想世界, trans. Cheng Gang 程鋼 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2008), 547, 549.

36 Zheng Zhenman 鄭振滿, “Huanan xuezhe de lishi renlei xue: chuancheng yu hudong” 華南學者的歷史人類學：傳承與互動, *Kaifang shidai* 開放時代, no. 4 (2016): 14.

as the growth of regional communities; that is, studies that would integrate long-term, broad, and micro-political perspectives.

It may be said that actively contributing to national politics and the construction of local communities was one of folk custom's political orientations, and that with its characteristic stability and reproducibility, it had a sustained effect on local social life; it endowed individual citizens with a sense of belonging and a sense of meaning in life, which was the root of folklore. In terms of social practices, major tension existed between the statutory nature of national institutions, as represented by ritual, and the spontaneous nature of everyday people's lives, as represented by custom, leading to mutual benefit and complementarity, but also mutual restriction and exclusion. "Mutual benefit and complementarity" meant that the governance of the nation altered the space available to folk custom, promoting constant change. To a certain extent, the development of folk custom also influenced the formulation and amendment of national governance strategies. "Mutual restriction and exclusion," on the other hand, refers to the relation of control and counter-control between custom and ritual. The Chinese socio-political tradition always drew on the interaction between custom and ritual as a link between national politics and nongovernmental "micropolitics," and as a means by which to build the legitimacy of state power on the sanctity of folk traditions. Thus, any possible mutual restriction and exclusion in the relation between the two were lessened or circumvented.

3 Findings from the Field on the Interaction between Custom and Ritual

During our fieldwork investigations in rural northern China, we found the aforementioned "interaction between custom and ritual" to be not merely a social phenomenon with ample expression in different locations; it is also a concept that has been universally internalized by ordinary people. In their dealings with other people, villagers frequently combine the two sets of rules from custom and ritual, being mindful of "respecting reason" (ritual) but also of the need for "the common touch." When combined, the two elements form a whole in the culture of everyday life. In rural public opinion, the appropriateness of a person's words and deeds and the suitability of their social interactions often hinge on whether they observe reason and understand ritual. Behind this discourse, an implicit logic of ritual and a public mechanism are at work.

For instance, in Wazicun village 窪子村 in Shandong province, the construction of historical memory embodies multiple interactive practices involving

numerous people at various times and in various places, manifesting a process in which individual memory is integrated into collective memory. Many older villagers, whether on the main street on a warm winter's day, at banquets held by family and friends, in the fields or the marketplace, or in small factories and groceries, spend extended periods of time "shooting the breeze" over topics both old and new,³⁷ savoring the mood over long and repeated expressions, and adding remarks to the conversation between constant sipping and tasting. Their conversations appear to be highly discursive, but ultimately always point to a differentiation between "ritual" and "reason." These villagers, who mainly use colloquial language as their means of interaction, do not discriminate between "ritual" and "reason"; they merely borrow from the national discourse of the norms of ritual, to emphasize the legitimacy and transcendence of local ethics. I also noted that those people who were mindful of "ritual" or "old ritual" upheld each idea of "national orthodoxy" that was dear to them in the face of "people who push the envelope" and were very fond of community performances or family-based ritual activities – a simple case of divergent understandings of what constituted "national orthodoxy." Citing the example of a dragon society in Fanzhuang 范莊, a town in Zhao county in the south of Hebei province, Stephan Feuchtwang believes that peasants who participated in martial arts performances at temple fairs did so in accordance with how they imagined state-derived norms of ritual, using symbolic performance techniques to strengthen the social order, not to challenge the state for political resources.³⁸ It is evident that against the backdrop of "state authority in late imperial China" and cultural concepts that stretched across the globe, "ordinary Chinese people possessed their own means of applying imperial metaphors to assert their status as members of their community."³⁹

It is also common to hear expressions such as "first the temple, then the village" in rural areas of northern China. Behind statements such as this are implicit demands for the people to be able to establish villages in the name of the sacred and for integration into the national system. In village discourse,

37 Zhang Shishan 張士閃, *Xiang min yishu de wenhua jiedu: Luzhong si cun kaocha* 鄉民藝術的文化解讀—魯中四村考察 (Jinan: Shandong renmin chubanshe, 2005), 180–88.

38 Stephan Feuchtwang 王斯福, "Nongmin yihuo gongmin?" 農民抑或公民? in *Xiangtu shehui de zhixu, gongzheng yu quanwei* 鄉土社會的秩序、公正與權威, ed. Wang Mingming 王銘銘 and Stephan Feuchtwang 王斯福 (Beijing: Zhongguo zhengfa daxue chubanshe, 1997), 6–10.

39 Helen F. Siu 蕭鳳霞, "Nian zai Huanan yanjiu zhi lu" 廿載華南研究之旅, in *Xuebu yu chaoyue: Huanan yanjiuhui lunwenji* 學步與超越: 華南研究會論文集, ed. Huanan yanjiuhui bianji weiyuanhui 華南研究會編輯委員會 (Hong Kong: Wenhua chuanguang chubanshe, 2004), 35.

the act of building a temple is analogous to the ritual of “separate stoves” in a family separation. “Separate stoves” does not refer simply to economic behavior such as the distribution of household utensils or household debts between a father and son; it also refers to the need to invest the new household with a stand-alone identity through social interaction. For the same reason, an inhabited area without a temple, regardless of population size, is viewed merely as a settlement rather than an independent village community. A settlement can only qualify as a village after construction on a temple has started, and a cosmic system of humans, ghosts, and gods is enshrined. Even more vital is the ability to have direct contact with the national polity via the construction process, allowing the people to be “within reach of civilization.” Even if they are located in a remote region, people still establish a space-time order of heaven and earth in the name of imperial power and the gods, and a value system. Moreover, almost all of China’s legends, traditional operas, and colloquial *hua-ben* 話本 stories that deal with historical themes relate to imperial power and deities. The reasoning is the same.

Doubtless, the state always had “a profound influence on daily life in rural society,”⁴⁰ but in the rural context, “the state” was also often viewed as a cultural resource that could supply discussion, exchange, repackaging, and the adaptation of ideas. Acceptance of top-down state institutions was mandatory, but ordinary Chinese people possessed a corresponding path of their own which frequently sought improvement in their lives via a process of acceptance, replacement, and reconstruction. This interface between the “state” and the “people” thus has multiple implications. Clearly, the national government’s pursuit of the integration of custom and ritual can only be realized with broad-based cooperation from across society, and thus it must reserve space for a society in which micropolitics can operate.

4 Conclusion

In traditional and modern China, an interactive, symbiotic relationship has always existed between national politics and popular society. This proposition has always been neglected by Western political tradition. China possesses a

40 Liu Zhiwei 劉志偉 and Chen Chunsheng 陳春聲, “Lishi xue benwei de chuantong Zhongguo xiangcun shehui yanjiu” 歷史學本位的傳統中國鄉村社會研究, in *Zhongguo lishi xue nianjian (1997 nian)* 中國歷史學年鑑(1997年), ed. Zhongguo shixue hui Zhongguo lishi xue nianjian bianji bu 中國史學會《中國歷史學年鑑》編輯部 (Beijing: Shenghuo – dushu – xinzhishi san lian shudian, 1998), 9.

social tradition in which “custom” and “ritual” merge, which guides and regulates people’s behavior and speech. This is distinct from the emphasis on the absolute rule of law in Western societies. Folk culture is, after all, suffused with the life wisdom and collective will of a region’s ordinary people; it is sustained by folk society’s moral and ethical concepts, spiritual needs, and value system formed over thousands of years, forming comparatively stable norms for group behavior. Both separation and cooperation existed between the state’s will to power and folk society’s self-generated “normative” power; there was disagreement between the two, but also dialogue, and a striving, via cooperation and dialogue, to elevate everyday norms into the realm of public values.

There is, in other words, an aspect to the two discourses of “custom” and “ritual” lacking general agreement. However, another way of approaching it is to say that the value and vitality of the traditional Chinese interaction between custom and ritual lie precisely therein.⁴¹ The essential point about this interaction is support in the form of wide-ranging social involvement, and the linkage between national politics and civil “micropolitics,” which ensured that society’s internal mechanisms functioned smoothly and eliminated real or potential social crises through cultural identity. This tradition has been severely challenged by the advent of modern civilization, and appears, on the surface, to have withdrawn from mainstream Chinese civilizational heritage. However, the legacy of this tradition has not truly been lost; rather, it has been maintained as part of local social life. A resurgence began in the 1980s, echoing in the social sphere the sustained and deep national reforms of the period. Particularly now, in the present era, with a social landscape characterized by “space-time compression,” a situation of unprecedented complexity has emerged amid international trends, national politics, and local communities. Topics related to custom and ritual touch upon not only the construction of national and local life, but international geopolitical issues as well. In a time of accelerating globalization and informatization, connections across space and time have become simple and direct, putting “the interaction between custom and ritual” further in the spotlight. As every country faces multiple considerations of international regulations, national legal rights, and civil governance, the traditional political wisdom and social mechanisms embedded in the interaction between custom and ritual may be useful.

41 Feng Jianmin 馮建民, “Keju zhidu dui Zhongguo chuantong lisu de yingxiang ji qishi” 科舉制度對中國傳統禮俗的影響及啟示, *Nanjing youdian daxue xuebao* 南京郵電大學學報, no. 3 (2010): 102.

Acknowledgments

This article is funded by National Social Science Foundation of China (Major Program on Art) on “Theoretical and Practical Research on Chinese Art Folklore” (project no. 22ZD06).

Translated by Damien Kinney

Works Cited

- Chang, Jincang 常金倉. *Zhou dai lisu yanjiu* 周代禮俗研究. Ha'erbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 2004.
- Deng, Ziqin 鄧子琴. *Zhongguo lisu xue gangyao* 中國禮俗學綱要. Nanjing: Zhongguo wenhua she, 1947.
- Du, Weidong 杜衛東. “Jindai Zhongguo zouxiang shijie diyiren” 近代中國走向世界第一人. *Guangming ribao* 光明日報. July 9, 2022.
- Faure, David 科大衛 and Liu Zhiwei 劉志偉. “Biaozhun hua’ haishi ‘zhengtong hua’? Cong minjian xinyang yu liyi kan Zhongguo wenhua de da yitong” “標準化” 還是 “正統化”？—從民間信仰與禮儀看中國文化的大一統. *Lishi renlei xue xuekan* 歷史人類學學刊, no. 1, 2 (2008): 1–21.
- Feng, Jianmin 馮建民. “Keju zhidu dui Zhongguo chuantong lisu de yingxiang ji qishi” 科舉制度對中國傳統禮俗的影響及啟示. *Nanjing youdian daxue xuebao* 南京郵電大學學報, no. 3 (2010): 102–7.
- Feuchtwang, Stephan 王斯福. “Nongmin yihuo gongmin?” 農民抑或公民? In *Xiangtu shehui de zhixu, gongzheng yu quanwei* 鄉土社會的秩序、公正與權威, edited by Wang Mingming 王銘銘 and Stephan Feuchtwang 王斯福, 6–10. Beijing: Zhongguo zhengfa daxue chubanshe, 1997.
- Gan, Yang 甘陽. “Minjian shehui’ gainian pipan” “民間社會” 概念批判. In *Guojia yu shehui* 國家與社會, edited by Zhang Jing 張靜, 24–35. Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1998.
- Geng, Bo 耿波. “Lisu hudong chuantong zhong de Xu Fuguan nong ben zhengzhi guan” 禮俗互動傳統中的徐復觀農本政治觀. *Zhongguo zhengfa daxue xuebao* 中國政法大學學報, no. 2 (2014): 28–35.
- Gu, Jiegang 顧頡剛. “Shengxian wenhua yu minzhong wenhua” 聖賢文化與民眾文化. *Minsu zhoukan* 民俗週刊, no. 5 (1928): 1–7.
- Hanshu* 漢書. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962.
- Huang, Zunxian 黃遵憲. *Riben guo zhi* 日本國志. Annotated by Li Shaoping 李紹平. Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2016.

- Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義. Vol. 6 of *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, edited by Li Xueqin 李學勤. Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999.
- Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義. Vol. 3 of *Shisanjing zhushu (Qing Jiaqing kanben)* 十三經注疏 (清嘉慶刊本), edited by Ruan Yuan 阮元. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009.
- Liu, Tieliang 劉鐵梁. “Chuantong xiangcun shehui zhong jiating de quanyi yu diwei: Huangpu jiang yan’an cunluo minsu de diaocha” 傳統鄉村社會中家庭的權益與地位—黃浦江沿岸村落民俗的調查. *Beijing shifan daxue xuebao* 北京師範大學學報, no. 6 (2001): 61–69.
- Liu, Tieliang 劉鐵梁. “Cunluo shenghuo yu wenhua tixi zhong de xiang min yishu” 村落生活與文化體系中的鄉民藝術. *Minzu yishu* 民族藝術, no. 1 (2006): 38–42.
- Liu, Yizheng 柳詒徵. “Zhongguo lisu shi fafan” 中國禮俗史發凡. *Xue yuan* 學原, no. 1 (1947): 19–37.
- Liu, Zhiqin 劉志琴. “Lisu hudong shi Zhongguo sixiang shi de bentu tese” 禮俗互動是中國思想史的本土特色. *Dongfang luntan* 東方論壇, no. 3 (2008): 1–8.
- Liu, Zhiqin 劉志琴. “Lisu wenhua de zai yanjiu: huiying wenhua yanjiu de xin sichao” 禮俗文化的再研究—回應文化研究的新思潮. *Shi xue lilun yanjiu* 史學理論研究, no. 1 (2005): 40–50, 158.
- Liu, Zhiqin 劉志琴. “Lisu hudong de guoqing yu minxing” 禮俗互動的國情與民性. *Beijing ribao* 北京日報, October 27, 2014.
- Liu, Zhiwei 劉志偉 and Chen Chunsheng 陳春聲. “Lishi xue benwei de chuantong Zhongguo xiangcun shehui yanjiu” 歷史學本位的傳統中國鄉村社會研究. In *Zhongguo lishi xue nianjian (1997 nian)* 中國歷史學年鑑(1997年), edited by Zhongguo shixue hui *Zhongguo lishi xue nianjian bianji bu* 中國史學會《中國歷史學年鑑》編輯部. Beijing: Shenghuo – dushu – xinzhi san lian shudian, 1998.
- Lü, Wei 呂微. “Xiandai xing lunzheng zhong de minjian wenxue” 現代性論爭中的民間文學. *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論, no. 2 (2000): 124–34.
- Luo, Zhitian 羅志田. “Difang de jinshi shi: ‘junxian kongxu’ shidai de lixia shuren yu xiangli shehui” 地方的近世史: “郡縣空虛” 時代的禮下庶人與鄉里社會. *Jindaishi yanjiu* 近代史研究, no. 5 (2015): 6–27.
- Peng, Mu 彭牧. “Tong yi zhi jian: li yu yishi” 同異之間: 禮與儀式. *Minsu yanjiu* 民俗研究, no. 3 (2014): 5–14.
- Schwartz, Benjamin 史華慈. *Gudai Zhongguo de sixiang shijie* 古代中國的思想世界, translated by Cheng Gang 程鋼. Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2008.
- Shao, Fengli 邵鳳麗. “Huashuo lisu” 话说礼俗. *Baike zhishi* 百科知識, no. 18 (2014): 45–46.
- Shen, Jie 沈潔. “Lisu gaizao de xueshu shijian: ershi shiji er sanshi niandai Zhongguo minsu xuejia de lisu diaocha” 禮俗改造的學術實踐—20世紀二三十年代中國民俗學家的禮俗調查. *Shi lin* 史林, no. 1 (2008): 140–54.
- Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏. Edited by Li Xueqin 李學勤. Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999.

- Siu, Helen F. 蕭鳳霞. "Nian zai Huanan yanjiu zhi lü" 廿載華南研究之旅. In *Xuebu yu chaoyue: Huanan yanjiuhui lunwenji* 學步與超越: 華南研究會論文集, edited by Huanan yanjiuhui bianji weiyuanhui 華南研究會編輯委員會. Hong Kong: Wenhua chuangzao chubanshe, 2004.
- Wang, Guimin 王貴民. *Zhongguo lisu shi* 中國禮俗史. Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1993.
- Wang, Yangming 王陽明. *Wang Yangming quanji (xin bian ben)* 王陽明全集 (新編本). Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2010.
- Yang, Nianqun 楊念群. "Da yitong": quanshi 'hewei Zhongguo' de yige xin tujing" "大一統": 詮釋 "何謂中國" 的一個新途徑. *Nanfang wenwu* 南方文物, no. 1 (2016): 12-15.
- Yang, Zhigang 楊志剛. "Lisu yu Zhongguo wenhua" 禮俗與中國文化. *Fudan xuebao* 復旦學報, no. 3 (1990): 77-82.
- Zhang, Shishan 張士閃. *Xiang min yishu de wenhua jiedu: Luzhong si cun kaocha* 鄉民藝術的文化解讀—魯中四村考察. Jinan: Shandong renmin chubanshe, 2005.
- Zhang, Shishan 張士閃. "Yanguang xiang xia: xin shiqi Zhongguo yishu xue de 'tianye zhuanxiang' – yi yishu minsu xue wei hexin de kaocha" 眼光向下: 新時期中國藝術學的 "田野轉向" — 以藝術民俗學為核心的考察. *Minzu yishu* 民族藝術, no. 1 (2015): 17-22.
- Zhao, Shiyu 趙世瑜. "Er yuan de Jin ci: li yu su de fenhe" 二元的晉祠: 禮與俗的分合. *Minsu yanjiu* 民俗研究, no. 4 (2015): 10-12.
- Zhao, Shiyu 趙世瑜. *Xiao lishi yu da lishi: quyu shehui shi de linian, fangfa yu shijian* 小歷史與大歷史: 區域社會史的理念、方法與實踐. Beijing: Shenghuo – dushu – xinzhi san lian shudian, 2006.
- Zhao, Shiyu 趙世瑜, Xing Long 行龍, and Chang Jianhua 常建華. "Zouxiang duoyuan kaifang de shehui shi: Zhongguo shehui shi yanjiu 30 nian de huigu yu qianzhan" 走向多元開放的社會史—中國社會史研究30年的回顧與前瞻. *Guangming ribao* 光明日報, March 24, 2009.
- Zheng, Zhenman 鄭振滿. "Huanan xuezhe de lishi renlei xue: chuancheng yu hudong" 華南學者的歷史人類學: 傳承與互動. *Kaifang shidai* 開放時代, no. 4 (2016): 14-17.
- Zhong, Jingwen 鍾敬文. *Zhong Jingwen xueshu lunzhu zixuan ji* 鍾敬文學術論著自選集. Beijing: Shoudu shifan daxue chubanshe, 2004.